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The Price of Neutrality - - Isolation

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It has been said that it is far easier to become free than to remain so. Nowhere in the galaxy is this more in evidence than in the Cularin system. Newly emancipated by the unexpected announcement of its former Senator Lavina Wren, the planets of Cularin must now deal with the inevitable problems of breaking away from the Republic. While freedom from martial law is certainly a benefit, the many hidden costs begin to surface quickly throughout the system.

The saying should perhaps state, "It is far cheaper to become free..."

He pulled his freighter into line with the many other ships waiting for a clearance window to leave orbit. Space might be huge, but that wasn't in evidence over the skies of Cularin today. Right now, space was feeling cramped.

Comm static gave way to a fellow pilot's voice blaring over his transceiver. "Okay, who else is sick of these delays?"

Borrath "Big Haul" Freelan leaned back and turned the volume down - - but not off. He'd been waiting for the griping to start since Flight Control had spoken the words "two-hour wait" a few minutes ago. Right on cue, the whining had begun.

"Two by two, shipper." The voice was one he recognized as belonging to an old business partner of his. Technically, the ship Ogly was flying belonged to him, but the collapse of the system's only real Shipyard had destroyed all the records. Borrath considered tearing into his "old friend" on the comm about it, but that Bantha hunt could wait for another time. Besides, Ogly was small sailfish compared to the load he was moving. Until this score was done, he needed to lay low and keep quiet.

"Yeah! Who does Dal'nay think he is, setting up these checkpoints and making us wait in line for inspections before we can leave or return planetside?"

Another voice answered, one Borrath didn't know. "He probably thinks he's the Militia Commander, which, last I checked, he is, you nerf-brain."

The voice of Bor's long-time shipping nemesis "Hands" Malray cut in over the channel. "I don't give a frag who he thinks he is or why he's got us waiting. Militia Commander or Grand Chancellor, none of that matters. He's the one with that Nebula-A parked in front of us, and I don't fancy an ion bath. Do you?"

Borrath hated to admit when Hands was right, but he was so very right. He and the others weren't parked here because they agreed with the new initiatives on system safety put forth by the Militia. They were here because they didn't really have a choice. No one had been burned out of the stars yet, but more than a few ships had been comp-cooked by ion blasts and hauled dirtside for search and repair.

He knew someone was eventually going to say it, and "Twitcher" Xeelo didn't disappoint him. He spoke just enough Rodian to make out, "Martial law was better than this."

Borrath grabbed himself a cup of Go and settled into his chair. This was going to take a while.

"I hear that! The Republic didn't care what we were hauling as long as we passed a weapons scan and had up-to-date reg!"

"Oh, blow that out your airlock, nerfer! You never must have gotten boarded by a squad of clonies looking for Sep spies. They tore my ship apart looking for people who weren't there! I wouldn't even be flying if the Militia hadn't picked up the tab for piecing my transport back together."

"Spoken like a true symp! Hey, Moonrun, why don't you go to the head of the line and point your guns at us like the rest of these Militia swine?"

Borrath tuned out for a while, thinking about his own problems. None of these people had touched on the main thing yet. Life for an independent operator had gone way downhill since...

"... Nirama, and don't you forget it!"

He looked up and checked the comm ID screen. The voice was female, and the ship registered as the Last Light. Of all the people talking, she'd gotten his attention. At least someone in Cularin wasn't afraid to talk about He-who-should-not-be-named. As he expected, comm chatter died off for a bit.

Then finally, "Yeah, Last Light, that goes without saying."

The woman's voice answered again. "That's what's been happening, all right. Not a one of you've had the guts to talk about what's really been going wrong. When N was in charge, it meant something to fly these stars. Now, after the slug, everything's just drek, and no one's got the moons to do a thing about it."

Borrath topped off his cup and chuckled. Now this was entertainment. The comm got quiet again, but it didn't stay that way. In any group, there's always one person who just doesn't get it, and that person always chooses to speak at exactly the wrong time.

"But Nirama was a criminal and a pirate. Scum just as bad as Riboga, right?"

Bor cringed and glanced at the ID. Inwardly, he said goodbye to the captain of the Twilight Star. Whoever that twit was, he'd be dead if any one of the ships around him ever encountered him in open space.

Out of respect for the soon-to-be-deceased, Borrath turned off the open channel and sent a quick message on a coded line to the Last Light. It read, "Thanks for keeping the faith."

He didn't have to wait long for a reply. It came over the same code and was just as short. "Thanks for having some."

He waited a while before opening up the comm to listen to more banter. Some of the talk was valid -- prices on everything had gone up, flights in and out of system were more of a hassle, and the Militia was becoming, one might say, overprotective. Still, calmer heads prevailed and admitted that, like it or not, the current situation was vastly preferable to a Republic cruiser sitting over Cularin and another parked above Almas. Those things just made Borrath nervous. They had since the day they first arrived.

"You want my advice?" The voice was Ogly's. "We should blow this system and look for a better place to do business."

That tore it. Low profile or not, he had to say something. Hitting transmit, he spat into his comm, "Name one system better than Cularin, you star-snake. Name one."

The silence that followed -- and the rounds of cheering afterward -- were all the answer he needed and exactly what he'd expected. For all its problems, for all its hard knocks, there was nowhere like Cularin anywhere else in the galaxy.

Nowhere.